COMMERCE, MORALITY AND THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY NOVEL

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Since the 1980s analysts of the eighteenth-century novel have sought to locate the emergence of the genre in the context of contemporary fictional expectations and concepts of literary form. Writers such as Lennard Davis, Michael McKeon, William Ray and J. Paul Hunter[1] have developed the work of John Richetti in the late 1960s, which examined the relationship between the novel and forms of popular fiction,[2] and have made a concerted effort to reverse the teleological bias that has characterised much criticism since the publication of Ian Watt's *Rise of the Novel* in 1957.[3] As Richetti wrote in *Popular Fiction Before Richardson*:

> The beginnings of the novel must be approached as essentially an event in the development of mass culture, a social phenomenon with important consequences for literature proper. What is required is not a critical hunt for lost minor masterpieces . . . but an effort of the historical imagination to understand the values which the eighteenth-century reading public attached to fiction, or, at least the values which the most successful popular narratives advertised and delivered.[4]

J. Paul Hunter has argued along similar lines that:

> To understand the origins of the novel as a species and to read individual novels well, we must know several pasts and traditions – even non-fictional and non-narrative traditions, even non-'artistic' and non-written pasts – that at first might seem far removed from the pleasures readers find in modern novels . . . All texts – at least all texts that find or create readers – construct a field in which desires and provisions compete, and the history of texts . . . involves a continuous sorting out of needs, demands, insistences and outcomes.[5]

It is as part of this sorting out process, I would argue, that economic writings should be added to Richetti's whore biographies and rogue tales, Davis' news-sheets and ballads, McKeon's romances and spiritual biographies, and Hunter's journalism, didactic works and travel guides

to be recognised as part of the cultural context from which the novel 'rose'. For the development of economic analysis in the eighteenth century was not just a matter of significance to financiers and economists. It had a much wider impact, for it represented the emergence of a new discourse of social analysis which provided a radical challenge to the terms of the existing forms, redefining the relationship between the individual and the state and influencing images of the polity and ideas of social morality. As such it presented a fundamental challenge to the terms in which society could be represented, and to traditional ethical systems.

Much has been written about the eighteenth-century debate over commercial society, particularly in the last twenty-five years. Developing Caroline Robbins' classic study of the growth of liberal thought, *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman*, J. G. A. Pocock has demonstrated the importance of the rhetoric of civic humanism.[6] This discourse was based on a reinterpretation of classical Republican writings, and judged the workings of the economic system in essentially moral terms. Civic humanist writers identified ownership of land as a prerequisite for the possession of political power and political integrity, and the development of commerce and finance was therefore seen as liable to threaten the stability of the state. The owners of wealth in land had a personal stake in the maintenance of the power and wealth of the nation, so their private interest was consonant with the public interest. For owners of other forms of wealth, however, this was not necessarily the case. They were seen as liable to have private interests that were opposed to the interests of the public – most notably the perpetuation of the national debt. Landed wealth was therefore associated with the exertion of public virtue, and other forms of wealth with the lack of this essential quality.[7]

A number of recent critics have analysed the cultural consequences of the dominance of civic humanist ideology. John Barrell has traced its importance within writings on aesthetics, while David Solkin has described how both aesthetic theory and artistic practice responded to the conflict between an heroic ethos and commercial discourse based around politeness.[8] Stephen Copley has indicated how the language of civic humanism was modified by writers such as Defoe, Addison and Steele, who accepted its basic moral framework, with its emphasis on public virtue and the importance of the aristocracy, but incorporated a greater level of acceptance of the realities of the commercial system and an increasing recognition of the role of the middle class.[9] This tradition can be seen as a pre-structure for the emergence of the discourse of

political economy from the middle of the eighteenth century. Yet this book will argue that the discursive landscape of the eighteenth century was more complicated than some critical accounts have suggested. In addition to the mediated civic humanist discourse was another, more primitive kind of economic writing, which has tended to fall outside the explanatory paradigms of recent analysts.[10] In the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a number of writers began to move away from the classical preoccupations to construct a tradition of economic thought which was based on the assessment of the economic consequences of individual actions. By the eighteenth century many writers within this tradition were articulating beliefs which ran directly contrary to the civic humanist rhetoric, assuming, for example, that the maximisation of material wealth was the primary function and duty of individuals as well as of the state. These works can be seen as important precisely *because* of their progressive failure to engage with classical or traditional terms of analysis. They indicate the growth of an autonomous bourgeois model of the state which provided a challenge to conventional ethics through its refusal to endorse or reconcile itself with the classical moral agenda. While these works did not propound an explicit morality, they embodied an implicit code of behaviour that did not resemble the civic humanist model and which was predicated on a very different concept of the relationship between individuals and the state from that presented in either religious writings or works of moral philosophy.

The writers of the civic humanist tradition maintained a clear distinction between a sphere of public, political action, based on the furtherance of the interests of the state, and the private domestic realm, which was concerned with the family or the individual. The latter was conceived as invariably inferior to the former. A willingness to sacrifice the interests of the individual to the interests of the state was almost a defining feature of the civic humanist aristocrat. Yet this narrow political definition of the public was increasingly challenged in the course of the century. As the pursuit of self-interest began to be represented within economics as the duty of the individual, it became increasingly difficult to distinguish between the private and the public. This coincided with the emergence of a much looser, more modern notion of the public, referring not to a realm of political action, but to a general public or popular opinion. This did not usually relate to the totality of society (even in economic writings the labouring majority were still seen as the 'mob' or the 'masses') but rather to a wider notion of the social elite who could perhaps best be described as 'the reading classes'.

In practice the people who actually constituted the reading public of the eighteenth century were more diverse than the civic humanist public in sexual as well as social terms. More and more women were consuming and also producing literature, but the three competing visions of the social structure – of civic humanism, moral philosophy and economic analysis – all presented a view of society and the public that was more or less exclusively masculine. Civic humanism analysed the code of virtue that was appropriate to the aristocratic elite; moral philosophy analysed the behaviour and motivation of the 'refined' and intellectual classes; economics considered the role of the labouring class, but in each case it was assumed that the subjects were men. The novel that emerged in the course of the eighteenth century had to encounter the fragmentation of the social vision that resulted from the discursive conflicts, but it also had to recognise the partial nature of that vision, and reconcile the masculine concepts of the public emerging from the various traditions of social analysis, with the actual sexual diversity of the reading public.

Yet while the novel began to represent some of the interests and preoccupations of an increasingly bourgeois and female readership, the largely masculine critical establishment continued to emphasise ideas of literary form that were inherited from an aristocratic and patriarchal tradition of writing. In particular, the standards of classical epic were upheld and enforced. The conflicts over the kind of virtue that was to be identified as characteristic of eighteenth-century society were therefore underscored by conflicts over the form in which that virtue was to be presented.

There is some irony in the fact that while the early economic tracts and treatises have often been excluded from cultural analysis because they are 'low', the writings on epic seem to have been neglected because they are too 'high'. Both are perceived to fall outside the increasingly dominant discourses of a particular professional cultural elite that rose to prominence by the mid-century and was to form the basis for the bourgeois consciousness that has dominated the literary and critical establishment ever since. The economic writers are seen as tradesmen, tied to the commercial system and unable to appreciate the wider picture. The writers on epic are identified as being preoccupied with moribund standards, and divorced from the really significant developments within contemporary literature. Both have therefore been squeezed out of the picture, and afforded a far less important cultural role than their influence on eighteenth-century thinking appears to warrant.

Some academics have dismissed the writings on epic on the grounds that no great epic poems were produced in the eighteenth century. Yet it could be argued that the persistence of criticism of epic is significant precisely *because* no great epic poems were produced. Critics would obviously write about epic if there were a lot of successful epics about. What is interesting is the fact that they did so when there were not. Those attempting to create contemporary epics were forced to confront the inapplicability of epic standards to what was identified as an increasingly commercial and feminised state, based on the division of labour. Yet the critical establishment still continued to uphold epic as the most important literary form for the embodiment of national aspirations so that those writing in other genres were continually reminded of their inherent inferiority of status. This critical conservatism can be read as a manifestation of the uncertainty within the cultural elite, as it faced a variety of challenges. Faith in the eternal significance of the generic hierarchy was being undermined by both the emergence of new poetic forms and the increasing popularity of narrative fiction. The developing discourse of economic analysis enshrined models of the economic and social structure which challenged neoclassical concepts of literary form and ideas of representation. With both images of the state and perceptions of the role of literature undergoing change, the extent of the divergence between literary practice and critical theory is of considerable significance.

The maintenance of interest in epic standards and epic criteria, long after the emergence and apparent hegemony of the novel, also raises a more general issue concerning the tendency of modern critics to underestimate the importance of 'cultural inertia' within the societies they scrutinise. Despite the attempts over the last fifteen years to counteract the teleological enthusiasm that characterised much of the criticism in the sixties and seventies, there is still a tendency to value change and innovation over stasis and traditionalism. The novels of Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding are frequently evaluated in terms of their novelty, and the extent of their contribution to the development of the novel form, while works that are perceived to be retrogressive or reactionary receive little critical attention. The critical avoidance of both epic poetry and the preoccupation with the epic ideal in neoclassical criticism can be taken as evidence of this.

J. C. D. Clark has identified a comparable emphasis on change within the study of history, and has traced its origins to the campus radicalism of the 1960s and seventies. Clark argues that social history in particular

was dominated by socialist historians, and by a belief that a stress on radical movements in society was necessary for a work of historical exegesis to be itself considered 'radical'.[11] Yet the progressivist tendency within literature seems to have rather different ideological roots. The emphasis on change and innovation is connected with the persistence of liberal humanist notions of the enduring value of literary texts, and of the importance of individual works, either as models of moral and aesthetic excellence, or as contributions to the development of literary forms that will ultimately produce such excellent works. In this vision of literary criticism, Samuel Richardson's epic novel *Clarissa* is more worthy of study than Richard Glover's epic poem *Leonidas*. Such a preference may be justified either on the grounds that Richardson's innovative form ensures that *Clarissa* is 'better' than *Leonidas* (in that it generates more moral, aesthetic and intellectual satisfaction) or because *Clarissa* represents developments in narrative method that will make possible the work of Fanny Burney and thereafter Jane Austen. In contrast, *Leonidas* is not a great influence on subsequent literary form and, in terms of the conventional concept of the canon, Glover's role is limited.

The focus of this book is not, however, the evaluation of contributions to the canon or the celebration of literary excellence. Instead it represents an attempt to recover aspects of the social and cultural environment in which novels were written and read, facilitating the analysis of their meanings and significances, particularly in relation to the construction of images of the social system. In this context it is vital to appreciate the way that literature sought to resist change, as well as the way that it adapted to it. The backward-looking, minor or dead-end discourses constitute a significant aspect of our past. The maintenance of epic standards and aspirations into the eighteenth century can be taken as evidence of conservatism in both literature and society, but it is also important in relation to the development of the novel. By analysing what the writers of epic were trying to do, we can highlight those retrogressive aspects of the novel form that have been subsumed or neglected within progressivist readings.

The novels of the mid-eighteenth century developed within a society that contained a variety of competing images of the role of the individual and his or her relationship to the wider community of the state. There was no simple consensus about how society should be described, or about the sort of values which it should enshrine. Moral and economic discourse propagated divergent ethical models, while the patri-

archal epic ideal of heroic conduct was increasingly challenged by more feminised fictional formulations. The mid-century novel therefore developed at a time of social and moral but also literary uncertainty. While moral and economic writers debated how the individual should behave within society, novelists, poets and critics became preoccupied with the contingent issue of the code of conduct that should be represented within literature, and the generic codes that were appropriate for the expression of the aspirations of the modern state. The novel form became both the subject of debate, and the forum within which it was contested. I shall examine four mid-century novels, to indicate the values and morals explicitly advocated, but also the extent to which the structure as well as the themes of narrative fiction manifested anxieties about the role of this morality within an increasingly commercial state, and the ability of the novel to represent that state.

The novels selected include two which are still regularly read and studied (Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* and Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones*); one that is part of the revised canon that has been constructed by feminist critics (Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*); and one work which, despite being the favoured reading matter of both Jane Austen and George Eliot, is rarely read today, even within universities (Richardson's *Sir Charles Grandison*). Like Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, both *The Female Quixote* and *Grandison* explored the non-heroic nature of modern society by highlighting the disparity between the modern world and traditional or literary codes of conduct. Lennox exploits the disjunction between the commercial state and the world of romance in order to achieve a comic effect. In *Grandison* the questioning of the codes of honour and chivalry sometimes appear to subvert the rationale of the text itself.

In relation to the more canonical works of Richardson and Fielding, the identification of a network of economic, moral and aesthetic uncertainties serves to undermine a number of established ideas and interpretations. The image of Fielding as the great patrician, constructing an authoritative narrative predicated on the subordination of the reader, and of Richardson as the great innovator, developing a new and ultimately subversive form, is opened up for revision. The mid-eighteenth-century novel can ultimately be seen as an embodiment of the ethical tensions that conditioned the period, shaped by the artistic consequence of the divide between old civic humanist concepts of the public and more modern, private terms of analysis of moral behaviour.

The final section of this book will consider how this divide affected

various types of fiction that developed in the second half of the century. In the first half of the century the novel consisted of an assortment of very diverse individual works. Thereafter it remained equally diverse, but the diversity became more classifiable, as the form fragmented into a variety of sub-genres, each with its own structures and conventions. One species of writing that has received little attention from the modern critical establishment, but which clearly defined itself as a distinct literary form, was what I have elsewhere termed the 'novel of circulation'.[12] This involved the portrayal of the adventures of a non-human protagonist – an object or animal – which was passed through society by a series of acts of exchange, and was thereby able to experience at first-hand the diversity of the modern community. The format of the 'novel of circulation' inevitably provided the context for a critique of the economic system that was frequently based on civic humanist rhetoric, while at the same time it drew on the concept that trade was a mechanism for uniting the diverse parts of a divided community. But as the novel of circulation attempted to provide an image of the extensive economy, without the invocation of private morality the main trend of the novel was in the opposite direction, towards a focus on intensive and personal experience.

Ironically, it is in the sentimental novel, with its emphasis on private and affective codes of behaviour, that some of the most thorough and explicit analyses of the economic system can be found. Sentimental writers drew attention to the gap between the private values they sought to celebrate, and the very different ethos and aspirations which they represented as characteristic of society as a whole. The sentimental novel simultaneously rejected the idea of literature as having a simple mimetic function, and highlighted the marginal role for fiction within a commercial society.

The terms of the representation of the role of the novel were, however, rather different in the radical novels that were produced in the 1790s. These have, after Gary Kelly's extensive and definitive study, become generally referred to as 'jacobin' novels.[13] They attempted to invest fiction with a central, cultural position, by emphasising its political as well as its ethical importance. A resolution of the conflict between public and private virtue was sought in the elevation of the private to the status of the public. The philosophical belief that the improvement of society was based on the perfectability of the human mind ensured that the novel of experience inevitably became a polemical vehicle, with phylogeny located in narrative ontogeny. Solutions to social problems

were found in the story of the individual, while institutions were represented as inimical to the propagation of private morality. At the same time, however, women jacobin writers developed the novel form to attack the confinement of the female sex within a limited affective sphere. The dominance of the private, sentimental realm was seen as having prevented women's participation in the public world, but also precluded the development of the strength of mind and breadth of outlook that were seen as necessary for such participation. Irrationality and irresolution were not natural to women, but were imposed on them by their restricted social role.

So while the jacobin writers attempted to resurrect some of the wider cognitive functions of fiction, they also embodied the importance of gender in the terms in which the role of the individual was conceptualised. The emphasis within male texts on personal moral development was countered by the female recognition of the destructive potential of the dominance of the private and domestic. The male enthusiasm for the formative nature of individual experience was juxtaposed with a female suspicion that the construction of a separate private sphere was itself a manifestation of the controlling power of the institutions of patriarchy. So while the male and female jacobin texts can be seen as springing from common ideological roots, their gendered perspectives ensured that they offered very different visions of the role of fiction and its relationship to concepts of public and private. Yet both shared a desire to problematise and politicise these concepts. In this respect, they can be read as part of a new fictional genre, but also as the final phase of an old struggle to give the novel the kind of public and political significance that was seen by many writers and thinkers, particularly at the start of the century, as the key to respectability and credibility. Even as they attempted to construct their political fictions, the novel was being shaped by Fanny Burney into the private and intimate story of individual moral awakening that was to form the basis of Jane Austen's achievement in the nineteenth century. In this tradition the elision of the public and the private succeeded because the idea of a distinct political or ethical sphere was finally abandoned, and private morality was unproblematically assumed to be of general interest and relevance.

The eighteenth-century novel therefore represents a kind of Mandevillian Moment, in which the contest between public and private morality was brought to the fore, and the novel became the ground on which it was fought. The ensuing discussion will aim to bring out the

importance of the public in novels which have frequently been interpreted retrospectively, in the light of the ultimate triumph of a private, feminised version of morality. But before considering the novel, I will look at the economic, philosophical and literary context to indicate why the ethical conflicts were considered to be so important.